

New Book Looks at Lives of Trans Sex Workers in World of Ryan Murphy's «Pose»

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The June 3 debut of Ryan Murphy's «Pose», set in the late 80s NYC world of black and Latino drag competitions known as «balls» presents a great opportunity to raise awareness of the harsh lives of many trans people of colour, particularly those on the ball culture scene, who do sex work to survive.



As gorgeous and «fierce» (to use the ultimate compliment of the era) as «Pose» promises to be, off the screen and outside the ballroom the lives of the real-life trans sex workers who inspired the show are often fraught with poverty, desperation, drugs, violence, and too often death.

In «Paris is Burning», Jenny Livingston's 1990 documentary about the same world fictionalised in «Pose», one of the most quotable subjects, Venus Xtravaganza, is found strangled in a hotel room four days after her death; she'd been murdered by a client who discovered that she had a penis.

In Wolfgang Busch's 2006 documentary «How Do I Look?» (dubbed the sequel to Paris Is Burning) the gorgeous Heavenly Angel Octavia Saint Laurent (also in Paris is Burning) discusses doing sex work. And in «Trinkets», the 2018 musical about sex workers on Manhattan's West Side in the mid-90s, Monique turns up dead in the morgue after driving off with a trick.

Earlier this year, scholarly **LGBTQ** publisher Harrington Park Press (Columbia University Press) released the book, «Transgender Sex Work and Society». Edited by **Larry Nuttbrock**, PhD, it is the first and only collection of studies on the lives of trans sex workers around the world. The book's first chapter, Sel Hwahng's «Qualitative Description of Sex Work among Transwomen in New York City», describes the lives of trans sex workers on the very scene portrayed in «Pose».

Hwahng, who identifies as transmasculine, says, «I want the general public to understand that transgender sex workers who are sex workers to pay for their survival needs live very harsh lives. They are most often trans women of colour and poor, and their race/gender/class positions reflect the race/gender/class inequalities we have in the U.S.».

In the book they write of the «fem queens» and trans women of the House Ball community:

House Ball members were forced into prostitution because of drug addiction, poverty, or lack of education. Because of the long history of extreme stigma experienced by members of the House Ball community, sex work, along with drug use as a coping mechanism for sex work, has become internalised within the community as a rite of passage. YoungMTF [trans women] members of the House Ball community must go through this rite of passage because of the perception that there is no alternative for them other than sex work and drug use.

Transgender people in the House Ball community appeared to often procure body modifications, such as silicone injections and surgery, and hormones within both the legal and underground body-modification markets. These transgender people engaged in sex work, then, to pay for these modifications, not just to finance survival needs such as clothing, food, and shelter. They often experienced the financial expenses of body modifications as additional burdens within lifestyles for which survival itself was often a struggle.

Trans author, actress, activist, and former sex worker **Janet Mock** is one of four writers on the «Pose» scriptwriting team. In discussing her time as a sex worker, she says, «That money was quick. Quick money enabled me to do things more quickly and for me, my body issues, my body image issues, the way I felt about myself, those were urgent matters. . . I needed them now».

«These girls go through a lot of stuff, a lot of them have to turn to lifestyles and do things that they don't want to do because they have no other choice . . . sex working and selling drugs and stuff like that», a research associate on the book explained. «But they don't have any opportunities».

«I think it's degrading that I have a man slobbering all over me for fifty bucks, you know?» said one House Ball member quoted in Nuttbrock's book. «That's why I stopped. I mean, from the beginning I was disgusted with it, and I said this is not really me. But sometimes I did what I had to do to survive».

Not only is the «survival sex work» often degrading and repugnant, it can also be terrifying and dangerous. As Hwahng explains:

Because of the type of sex work they were involved in, House Ball members appeared to have the lowest negotiating power in relation to safe sex with sexual partners. As indicated by the normalisation of multiple rapes and drug use voiced by several members in this community, House Ball members were more vulnerable to random acts of violence as streetwalkers, and these harsh conditions seemed to push many into drug use. Members gave accounts of numerous deaths occurring regularly in this community through overdose and homicide. A House Ball member related: «I never had an experience, but I know a lot of the girls that have, where they've been cut in the face, [the clients] give them the money, then they drive them away somewhere and then they beat them and take the money back».

With lives like this, it is easy to appreciate why the ball culture of Houses, House Mothers and Fathers, drama, fashion, performance, and the escape—and comfort—it provides are so fiercely revered by its members.

While «Pose» viewers may gleefully invoke late 80s/early 90s ball culture lexicon («fierce», «shade», «yas queen», «work») first uttered in «Paris Is Burning», later co-opted by «RuPaul's Drag Race», and subsequently the pop culture media, the arrival of «Pose» is an opportune moment to remember and vociferously support those at the root of this scene and its lingo: the trans people of colour who ruled the Houses and walked the Balls.

Donate to The National Center for Trans Equality at www.transequality.org, The Global Network of Sex Work Projects www.nswp.org, and the Audre Lorde Project, which supports LGBTQ people of color at www.alp.org.

«[Transgender Sex Work and Society](#)» is edited by Larry Nuttbrock, PhD. More about the book at www.harringtonparkpress.com.

In addition to the lives of those in **New York City House Ball** scene, «[Transgender Sex Work and Society](#)» explores the lives of sex workers around the world, including those in Turkey, India, Brazil, Malaysia, Thailand, Andean South America, Spain, and China.

The red umbrella on the book's cover art is the worldwide symbol of the sex workers' rights movement. More information and resources on the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) website at www.nswp.org.